



A Living Language

Cherokee Syllabary and Contemporary Art

Museum of the Cherokee Indian, June 12–October 31, 2021

Asheville Art Museum, November 18–March 22, 2021



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Cherokee Syllabary and Contemporary Art

Kenny Glass (Cherokee Nation), **SGPESᎠᎩ DᎠ ᎠᎩᎩᎩᎩᎩᎩ**, 2020, seed beads, trade beads, brass beads, bias tape, thimbles, wool, and cotton, 42 x 14 ½ x 5 inches. Courtesy the Artist. © Kenny Glass, image Museum of the Cherokee Indian.



Curatorial Statement

Hilary Schroeder, Asheville Art Museum

Through a vibrant array of materials, colors, and perspectives, the Cherokee syllabary finds an evocative, contemporary form of expression at the hands of the artists in *A Living Language: Cherokee Syllabary and Contemporary Art*. There is power in words, both written and spoken. I often find that power to be amplified in a work of art, when those words are placed in the context of composition, symbolism, and an artist's intent. The sections of this exhibition—*Syllabary in the Digital Era*, *Memory and Storytelling*, and *Syllabary as Identity*—are but a few of the many lenses in which one can see art unfold through the Cherokee language. As Bo Lossiah's essay attest, Sequoyah's gift to the Cherokee people is a form of honoring the past, contemplating the present, and looking to future. The Asheville Art Museum, situated upon the ancient, southern Appalachian ancestral homeland of the Cherokee Tribe and in the region that is still the home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians today, is thrilled for this partnership with the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. Furthermore, we look forward to celebrating these contemporary Eastern Band and Cherokee Nation artists and sharing their work with residents of and visitors to Western North Carolina, underscoring to all the living, breathing power of the Cherokee language, Cherokee syllabary, and Cherokee people.

A Living Language: Cherokee Syllabary and Contemporary Art

The Cherokee syllabary was invented and developed by a single person, Sequoyah (circa 1776-1843), and adopted by the community within five years. A syllabary is a written language in which each symbol represents a spoken sound, or syllables. The syllabary represents the Cherokee people's intellectual abilities and unique culture and also serves to reinforce cultural identity for Cherokee citizens. Syllabary was particularly important during the period of forced removal in the 1830s, as it was employed as a tactic to counteract the United States government's false narrative of incivility to justify removal and land dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

Due to the United States government's systematic forced assimilation policies, the number of native speakers and writers of the Cherokee language declined drastically, but in the 21st century a renewed effort to reestablish both the spoken and written language—including computer Unicode for syllabary characters—has brought the language into the digital era. Many Cherokee artists have incorporated the syllabary into their work, from paintings and metalwork to baskets and animation. The expressions of these contemporary Cherokee artists are examples of how the language and culture continues to evolve.

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Ꮎ ya	B ye	Ꮏ yi	Ꮏ yo	G yu	B yv			



Cherokee Syllabary Chart

Rhiannon Skye Tafoya (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), U'nigid', 2020, letterpress (photopolymer and Bembo & Cherokee Syllabary metal type) printed on handmade & color plan paper with paper-weaving, closed: 11 x 11 1/4 inches, assembled: 23 1/2 x 11 1/4 x 5 5/8 inches. Courtesy the Artist. © Rhiannon Skye Tafoya, image Rhiannon Skye Tafoya.

Syllabary in the Digital Era

For the last 200 years, syllabary has been carried through a number of technological changes, from letter and printing presses to typewriters and smartphones. With over 40 different fonts of syllabary available for computers, digital access to syllabary characters serves as inspiration to artists such as Jeff Edwards (Cherokee Nation), who is also part of the team that oversees the Unicode characters that populates computers, tablets, and smartphones. Other artists, such as Jakeli Swimmer (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), demonstrate how Cherokee people engage with technology and identity in the modern age.

Memory and Storytelling

Following the development of the syllabary, Cherokee histories, legends, and memories could be written in the Cherokee people's native language for the first time. The syllabary enabled Cherokee people to create the first bilingual newspaper in the United States. Throughout this exhibition, artists draw upon memory and storytelling for inspiration. In some works, such as Rhiannon Skye Tafoya's (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) Ul'nigid', personal history and connections to future and past generations are the central focus. In others, like **SGPESꯃꯩ Dꯃ SGPBꯃꯩ** (Wear Your Mask) by Kenny Glass (Cherokee Nation), artists capture the stories of the present, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Writing Identity

Syllabary has become increasingly prominent in the work of some Cherokee artists as a compositional element or the subject matter of the work itself. It is a way that artists explore and embrace their identities in a uniquely Cherokee way. Many artists in this exhibition, such as Janet Smith (Cherokee Nation), sign their artworks with their names in syllabary to underscore their connections to the written and spoken language. Syllabary is a tool for decorating forms and materials associated with Cherokee artistry, including a ceramic funerary urn by Louise Bigmeat Maney (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) and gourd artwork by Jennie Wilson (Cherokee Nation).



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FOR THE CHEROKEE

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PHENIX, No. 20

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sin which are but for a season, are ven-
daring upon a miserable eternity. There
is an impressive voice which sounds in
the word of God, that "except a man be
born again, he cannot see the kingdom
of God." John, iii, 3. A voice which
was uttered by that Saviour who will
shortly judge you; and if you should
then be found to be a stranger to this
new birth, it would be better for you
that you had never been born; for he
will say concerning you, "Take him,
and bind him hand and foot, and cast
him into outer darkness. There shall
be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
Matt. xxii, 13.

If you were to think of these things,
as becomes men that have never dy-
ing souls, they would ever be upper-
most in your mind. You would think
of them when at labour in the field, or
when busy in the house. O, happy
would it be for you, if an abiding sense
of them would drive you to Christ,
the strong hold, as a prisoner of hope.
But if you should determine to banish
all these thoughts, because they make
you uneasy, and go on dreaming of hap-
piness over the pit of destruction, be
assured that your delusion will not last
long. Soon death will come and take
you out of this world; and oh, what
sights will you then see! what sounds
will you then hear! what anguish will
you then feel! You who could not
hear to hear of hell, how will you en-
dure life for that shall never be
quenched? my brother, it seems
to me that you are fast preparing for
that place of torment; only think, 2
years, 3 1/2 months, 1498 weeks, 98
days, 136 5/8 hours, 8,191,200
minutes or 491,472 seconds, you will
be conscious me are gone, and you will
be conscious to him, is one forever. He
will be the great rest of this present

rich man there, lifting up yo
and in vain calling for one drop
ter to cool your parched tongu

Remember my brother, t
very little time, death and ju
and eternity, will overtake y
what haste is death making!
is no post so swift, there is no
ger so sure, and when he come
of all thy unjust gains, for wh
have sold your soul and salvat
of all your sinful pleasures,
will remain but the heavy re
and a bitter remembrance.
you must stand before the ju
seat of Christ. You must the
an account to him of your stewa
of your time, your talents, and
reigns, and why you employed t
your sinful pleasure and prof
not for his glory. And when I
say, "did I send thee into the
only to get wealth, and to for
immortal soul? Did I appo
sabbaths, to be profained b
and give you my word, only to
elected? Did I give you my la
commandments, only to be tr
upon? Did I not send my faithf
isters, to set before you the bl
which my grace provided for th
of sinners? And still, notwit
ing all this, did you not harde
heart, and go on in the way
of evil thoughts?" When t
Judge, shall put these ques
your soul, what answer will
able to give? Will you not be
ness with confusion and self cor
And will not your heart sink
you when you shall hear him pr
the awful sentence, "Depart fr
ye cursed, into everlasting fir
pared for the devil and his un-

Talking Leaves

Bo Lossiah

For Cherokees speaking our own language promotes a strong connection with all things that surround us and all matters inside of us. We describe the experience. We, see, taste, hear, and feel, a truly physical and spiritual process. It is how we communicate with the creator and all creations. Our explanation of the world has been passed on this way from generation to generation for thousands of years. Telling our stories and speaking our songs is inherent in our culture. It is natural. Today's written history was once a spoken tradition only. A tradition that represented moments in time enjoyed around many households and many fires for a very long time.

The syllabary is a symbolic communication that is relatively new (200 years compared to the thousands of years that we have been here), but it was not a foreign concept when it was presented to us. We have communicated messages of protection, medicine, and history in belts, pottery, gorgets (throat coverings), and petroglyphs for centuries. These early forms of symbology were effective. Their meanings were a part of our traditions and daily lives. They still are and will always be. Neighboring civilizations and alien cultures learned and respected the meanings of the symbols. They knew Cherokees were an integral part of nature. They knew that this area was our homeland. The symbols were reminders that we knew who we were, and we knew our purpose in all matters regarding time and space. There was no mystery to anyone. Other cultures knew these symbols to be Cherokee. These devices secured any notion as to who and what was a part of our culture.

In time the rest of the world grew tired of their own fires and sought new lands. They ventured into our lives. They brought new ideas and new tools. We learned about their vessels and technology. They brought the Bible to us and explained the meanings of its stories. We learned how to identify words and ideas from gestures of a hand to paper. We would describe the action as "ditsilosdanv"—"it is drawn or illustrated." Another word, "galeyatanvhi," is used to describe "print." It literally means "it's burned on it." We learned that something that looked like burn marks on leaves held commands that could alter communities. These burn marks expressed stories, notices, decrees, and treaties. This was a different symbology from what we were accustomed to, and eventually these papers would determine that this area was not ours. Subsequently, we questioned the validity of what our visitors were saying through these devices. We still do.

Christopher McCoy (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), Resilient Times (detail), 2021, DiBond metallic print on acrylic, 36 x 34 inches. Courtesy the Artist. © Christopher McCoy, image Christopher McCoy.

We learned their new language. Some of them learned ours. We learned their alphabet and written communication. We found that this device was more powerful than any weapon. "The pen is mightier than the sword," they told us. Sequoyah determined that we should create our own writing device. So he did. His first efforts were not accepted immediately. Some said it was a tool of something sinister.

After all, our visitors used their tool to tell us lies and validate our removal. At first some Cherokees did not see the value. Sequoyah demonstrated "didelogwasdodi," this learning tool, to his people. He continued his work with little support. He was chastised and ridiculed, but that did not stop him. All of his work was destroyed. He started over. His effort was eventually recognized and ratified by council in 1821. Within two years the Cherokee nation boasted a 90 percent literacy rate. Sequoyah's perseverance and genius was and still is reflected within all Cherokee people. That is his true gift.

The syllabary not only communicated our thoughts, principles, and ideas. Didelogwasdodi emboldened us. In time, we developed our own news to communicate to the masses. We developed material to be read by our people. Our writing system said, We are powerful.

JSCTAVJ DJ- We are tenacious in mind and body. We are innovative. We are artistic. We know our traditions. We are intelligent. We can adapt and overcome any hardship that is given, and we will be successful. The syllabary determines that the person reading it will know that it is intended to be understood by a Cherokee mind. That is its power. We communicate all this when we write our names and you see them: **"JBZY, JAVGAWY, JHSWY, SGOHWY, SMWVJ, SCWV, DYCQ, LSGE, OGF, CGG, HWT, OWHJ, AWWY, OFLPB, OULP, WYPRJ, CW, AS, and GWY!**

We know that when we see these words, the person wielding them holds them as a badge of honor. They are the family's crest, and we all feel that when we see them anywhere. That person with the syllabary on their car, on their shirt, on their artwork is a Driver, a Junaluska, a Bigwitch, a Lossiah, a Wachacha—but above all that person is a Cherokee. That consciousness is confirmed in the presentation. There are no apologies presented for those who do not understand.

Today we are revitalizing our language. We have endured a lot of change in a short amount of time. Our corner of the world is smaller, and many of our family members were forced to go west. The current members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are the ancestors of those

who were able to remain here and resist. In the early 1700s Cherokee towns and villages covered parts of what would have been eight states. While we were separated by the results of colonial expansion, we are now held together by our language. Dialectical differences are subtle. Some spelling derivations are evident, and some semantics have evolved geographically, but we all understand each other. We all know that we are brothers and sisters. We have the same traditions. We have the same clans. Even though we are many miles apart, we know that we are one people, together, in this world. That understanding and identity goes with us everywhere. The syllabary is a device that ensures that:

oHGWY

-We the Cherokee

HW, TSCHE, HW SOWHJ, HW YS

-One power, One Language, One Blood.

HW JAVHJAV JSLOVY

-Our hearts will be and will continue to be One.



Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), Gold N' Values, 2017, Arches watercolor paper printed with archival inks, acrylic paint, artificial sinew, copper foil, 11 x 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy Shan Goshorn Studio. © Estate of Shan Goshorn / Shan Goshorn Studio, image Museum of the Cherokee Indian.

Artists List

Joshua Adams, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Roy Boney Jr., Cherokee Nation
Nathan Bush, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
After Goingback Chiltosky, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Kane Crowe, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Jeff Edwards, Cherokee Nation
Joseph Erb, Cherokee Nation
Raychel Foster, Cherokee Nation
Kenny Glass, Cherokee Nation
John Henry Gloyne, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Shan Goshorn, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Luzene Hill, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Jody Bradley Lipscomb, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Christy Long, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Louise Bigmeat Maney, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Evan Mathis, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians 1st Descendant
Camilla McGinty, Cherokee Nation
Christopher McCoy, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Tara McCoy, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Jessica (Tyner) Mehta, Cherokee Nation
America Meredith, Cherokee Nation
Jane Osti, Cherokee Nation
Joel Queen, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Lisa Rutherford, Cherokee Nation
Sean Ross, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Janet L. Smith, Cherokee Nation
Jakeli Swimmer, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Rhiannon Skye Tafoya, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Jennifer Thiessen, Cherokee Nation
Mary Thompson, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Stan Tooni Jr., Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Alica Murphy Wildcatt, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Fred Wilnoty, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Jennie Wilson, Cherokee Nation

This exhibition is co-organized by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and the Asheville Art Museum and curated by Hilary Schroeder, assistant curator, Asheville Art Museum. Special thanks to Joshua Adams (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), curator, and S. Dakota Brown, education director, Museum of the Cherokee Indian, for their assistance with this exhibition.

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Designed by Tyra Maney
Photography by Tyra Maney
Edited by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and the Asheville Art Museum
Proofed by Anna Skinner.



Nathan Bush (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), Crown, hammered copper, 8 x 8 x 5 1/2 inches. Courtesy Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Cherokee, NC. © Nathan Bush, image Museum of the Cherokee Indian.

